

CHAPTER FOUR

Mother Earth:

Freeing the Flow of Life Force

— Mother Earth —

For nearly two thousand years, a peat bog in western Denmark held the clue to one of the most remarkable rituals of ancient Europe.¹ Unearthed from the bog, where they had lain preserved for all that time, were two beautiful and intricately carved wooden two-seater carts. The carts had four slender wooden wheels, and a frame covered with symbolic carved details, expertly chipped and sliced from the solid wood. Also recovered from the warm, womb-like protection of the peat bog was a small alder-wood stool, which was the seat for the person riding in one of the wagons. Except that it was not a *person* riding in the wagon; rather, the wagons were occupied by the Earth Goddess. And buried with the sacred carts were a number of objects, such as clay vessels, and pieces from upright looms, which were characteristic of the tools used by women in their work . . . or even their rituals. This was not an isolated find, for similar carved and decorated wagons from ancient times have been discovered in locations all over Europe.

The procession in which Mother Earth rode in the wagons introduces our ancestors' concept of the feminine, and will lead us into an exploration of the nature of life force.

In the early years of the first millennium the city state of Rome, which was remarkably 'modern' in many of its perspectives, served as a kind of forerunner of the Western society we recognise today. They had an impressively advanced understanding of engineering and building, a rationally organised civil service system, and disciplined military. Their relationship to the inhabitants of the rest of western Europe was in some ways rather like a developed Western nation

today in comparison with a Third World indigenous society, except that in those days we were the indigenous peoples, the 'savages' living on the untamed further reaches of the empire. Fortunately for us, attempting to weave together the wisdom of Wyrd from threads gathered at a distance of two thousand years, the Romans meticulously recorded in writing their observations and impressions of these wild people.

A Roman official named Tacitus was one of those charged with documenting the customs of the natives and, in his account called *Germania*, written in the year AD 98, he tells us that the Angli and other tribes living along the west coast of the Baltic, in what is today southern Denmark and northern Germany, participated in 'the common worship of Nerthus, that is Mother Earth'. *Germania* provides the fullest account of the early use of the symbolically carved wagons: 'On an island in the Ocean sea there is a sacred grove wherein waits a holy wagon covered by a drape,' writes Tacitus. 'One priest only is allowed to touch it. He can feel the presence of the goddess when she is there in her sanctuary.' This escort accompanies the wagon 'with great reverence' when at the appointed time of the year it is drawn from the island and pulled by oxen around the tribal lands.

Mother Earth, hidden in her wagon, was fêted wherever she went: 'It is a time of festive holiday-making in whatever place she deigns to honour with her advent and stay.' Clearly Mother Earth brought peace; wherever the wagon was pulled, 'No one goes to war, no one takes up arms, in fact every weapon is put away: only at that time are peace and quiet known and prized until the goddess, having had enough of people's company, is at last restored by the same priest to her temple.'

From Tacitus's commentary it sounds as if the goddess's stays in any one location were for a substantial period; certainly more than hours, more probably days, and perhaps even weeks, since 'no one goes to war' during her stay. The sight of these carved and draped wagons being wheeled about from village to village must have been common all over western Europe, presumably on days or seasons especially appointed for the ritual. We know that the Earth Goddess ceremony thrived in at least seven major tribal groups, reaching as far as south-

eastern Europe where Cybele, the Syrian goddess of fruitfulness, was similarly borne round the countryside, and St Martin in the fourth century AD tells of Cybele's image, covered with white curtains, carried round the fields in ancient Gaul. So Nerthus and her corresponding deities transcended not only tribal groups, but also entire peoples.

The people believed that Mother Earth was in some way present, hidden in the wagon, and the role of the 'priest', more like a figure we would recognise today as a shaman, was to interpret her messages to the communities being visited.

Mother Earth embodies the power of the feminine. Or rather, she symbolises it, for she has no physical body. She is materially invisible. But she is imaged as a woman, and she is accompanied by a priest, not a priestess. It is the masculine, indeed the sacralised masculine of a priest, who ritually consults the goddess, and attends to her needs. She is kept in reserve in a secret place, an island, inured from the warring aggression of the masculine aspect of the cultural psyche. And when necessary, or more likely at periods in harmony with the moon calendar, she is literally wheeled out.

The Earth Mother is the ultimate power, and it is only when she is 'present' that the fighting stops. It is more than just a suspension of inter-tribal skirmishing, it is a change of mind, of heart, from the usual. Mother Earth seems to allow light into darkness; she is consulted by the masculine, and dominates it, reigns over it when she is present, so that the masculine vices are curbed, suspended.

Although Mother Earth is treated with 'reverence' by the escorting shaman and the advent of the 'peace' is greatly welcomed, it is not a po-faced and ultra-serious occasion; Tacitus says that it is a time of 'festive holiday-making' wherever Nerthus deigns to stay. Clearly the arrival of the forces of the feminine in such a powerful guise provokes celebration, almost as if the masculine-dominated world of war and battle craves it, and suffers from the curse of strife to be lifted only when the power of peace from the feminine is present. And at the end of the visitation, when by implication the forces of the masculine begin to dominate once again, one assumes that eventually the weapons reappear.

So what do we make of this image of the invisible goddess on a sacred 'round', accompanied by a priest serving her needs, and bringing peace wherever she stayed? First of all, she is clearly an extremely powerful force for peace, and she represents the feminine. There are two aspects to this. One is the archetypal, the mythological, in which certain tendencies and perspectives, energies and passions, are characterised as feminine or masculine, but which are present in all of us to varying degrees. The other is the identification of gender with the mythological principles. Certainly our ancestors did not shy away from the latter; they made clear distinctions between the genders in some elements of life. And the Earth Mother (rather than some concept of Earth Father) was the bringer of peace.

But we would be very much mistaken if we assumed that the nature of the Earth Mother in the psyches of our ancestors was that of a soft, quiet, yielding presence. Far from it. In granting peace, she also exacted her price. Tacitus tells us what happened at the conclusion of the festivals, when the wagon containing the Earth Mother was wheeled back to the island from which she originally travelled, her sacred grove. It was an incredible and awesome closing ritual: 'After which, the wagon and the drape, and if you like to believe me, the deity herself are bathed in a mysterious pool. The rite is performed by slaves who, as soon as it is done, are drowned in the lake. In this way mystery begets dread and a pious ignorance concerning what that sight may be which only those about to die are allowed to see.'

Clearly this is no ordinary cleansing, no mere washing of the dust and mud from the wagon and a freshening up of the cloth which drapes over the top of it. This is something much more important. Mother Earth and her wagon are bathed in a secret pool, a ritual cleansing, a cleansing spiritually of the contamination of the society she has visited, reanointed and sacralised. And there is a price to be paid for the peace-bringing visit of the feminine presence: the slaves who wash her clean are put to death by drowning in the pool itself, so that they cannot reveal her intimate secrets. It is as if the final act of the visit of Mother Earth is to put down the masculine literally; to kill it. The slaves are sacrificed in her honour.

We are used to the mass slaughter of today's wars being rationalised

as 'in the name of God', from whichever religious source. But, perhaps because closer to hand and more intimate, the conscious sacrifice of people is more upsetting to us. The drowning of the slaves closes the ceremony with a disturbing and sobering act.

There was a recognition in the culture of Wyrd that the very same forces which brought peace could also bring violence; that those which brought life could also bring death. The ending of the Mother Earth ritual may be shocking to our minds, but is significant as an example of the balance of forces which hold all life together. Life force was something which was recycled. This does not mean of course that we would want to bring back such a ritual! But if we consider the procession of Mother Earth as an intra-psychic journey, a periodic visit of the forces of the feminine to counterbalance our masculine aggressions, what inner slaves do we have to sacrifice as homage to the insight, the recognition, the release brought about by the celebration of peace within ourselves? What do we have to give up in order to glimpse the essence of life, to experience the benefits and glories of her blessings?

Let us hold this question as we look at another aspect of the awesome responsibilities and significance of Mother Earth.

— Mother Earth as Lover —

We have talked about the presence of Mother Earth bringing peace, banishing war and replacing it with celebration. We have considered her presence as bringing blessings to the agricultural cycle: productivity and plenty. Today anthropologists sometimes regard the reverence, the rituals, the celebrations, the injunctions and taboos, the desiring to please and propitiate gods and goddesses in surviving indigenous societies as a 'superstition' fuelled by fear. Certainly for our ancestors the concept of Mother Earth was powerful and could induce fear, just as in the later Christian cosmology 'the fear of God' could strike people. But it was not a subservient, cringing fear which induced the indigenous peoples of early Europe to conduct their rituals which, after all, were sometimes referred to by the Roman writers and preaching clergy as 'celebrations' and 'festivities'. No,

what our ancestors felt was the love of Mother Earth. Love was the currency with which Mother Earth dealt with all life.

Over the centuries the identity of Mother Earth changed from Nerthus and the other early tribal names. In north-west Europe she became a goddess named Frigg.² This name means 'love'. Frigg embodied Earth vitality; the nurturing, life-giving powers of Mother Earth. In fact, Frigg was so important a goddess, so all-embracing in her significance and influence over all aspects of life, that she had many other aspects, each representing her various responsibilities and qualities. She was like a multi-faceted crystal. Each facet had a different name and a different power: Saga, Eir, Gefjun, Fulla, Freya, Sjöfn, Lofn, Var, Vor, Syn, Snotra, Hlin, Gna, Nanna, Sif and Idunn.

Scholars reckon that all of them represent aspects of Frigg or Mother Earth: seven of them are plainly so, while others are personifications of attributes of Frigg which derive from their names; for example Sjöfn, from the Old Norse 'sjafni' meaning 'love-longing', and Snotra, from the Old Norse 'snotr' meaning 'wise, prudent'. It is possible that these goddesses so named represented Frigg at various stages of womanhood as the seasons of the year unfolded, appearing as virgin, bride, mother, matron, hag and so on.

Frigg means love, but the process was not Platonic. Frigg was also the goddess of sexual desire. The fecundity of nature was identified with sex, and 'frigging' is still, a thousand years on, a slang word in English for sexual intercourse. Carved and modelled images of Frigg were overtly and outrageously sexual and erotic. Clearly the quality of nature's productivity was seen through the pulsating perspective of sexuality. And lust played a practical role in people's celebration of Mother Earth, although it is very likely that expressions of that lust were sanctioned or encouraged under specific conditions; for example, on festival dates in celebration of communally approved goddesses and ceremonies. There is no suggestion in the literature or iconography that suggests lust should be indulged as an individual whim.

While the whole of life was seen as an aspect of sexuality, it was not at all like the twentieth-century modern Freudian concern with the psychological symbolism of everyday events. Rather, the Wyrd view seems closer to Tantra and other mystical and spiritual disciplines in

which human sexual intercourse was experienced as symbolic of the greater forces of nature. In fact, love, lust and sex embodied the idea of freedom. To understand how this was so, we need to return briefly to the field ceremonies for crops.

The psychic world view underlying the ancient European shamanic celebrations is more understandable when we examine the significance of the crop, corn, which connotes an isomorphism between 'nature' and 'human'. This is one of the many connections, or even integrations, of the 'cosmic' with the 'personal'. It is a point at which the action of the sun, moon and the Earth to conjure life force, the 'spark' of life, was the same whether talking of crops and fields, or of people and human life.

The driving idea behind the symbolism of corn was that the 'seed' of new life was in the head, whether in the head of the crop, or the head of human beings. This is where the essence of life emanates from. This notion, now passed out of use, survived until very recently: a German idiom which has come down to us translates as 'he has groats [peeled grain] in his head,' meaning, 'he is intelligent.' So the grain is the seed, the essence of intelligent life.

It was a custom once widely spread in England and the continent to treat the last sheaf harvested as the 'corn spirit', representing the sacred essence of the crop, that which went beyond the merely pragmatic. The flower or fruit of a plant is called its head. The ritual was to cut it, 'beheading' or 'cutting the neck' of the corn spirit, and by this ritual claiming that part of the corn which sparked life, reaping and harvesting its power. Many ancient cultures practised rituals to go with the corn-planting and reaping which connect with this belief.

— The Binding of Life Force —

In the view of the tribespeople of Wyrd, just as life force coursed through fields, crops, wells and streams, all of nature, it also flowed within us, too. The life force was believed to be generated in the head, and flowed down channels in the spine and from there throughout the body and to the extremities and sexual organs.³ Life force in a person was inextricably linked with self-expression, freedom and vitality.

The free flowing of life force in a person was liberating, and the word 'liberate' stems from the root word 'libare', a 'pouring of a stream'. The word 'libido' used by Freud in this century to designate psychic energy is from the same source.

Slavery, which was sometimes a result of inter-tribal warfare, was a constriction, controlling, denial of life force. Slaves had their hair cut short as a visible sign that their life force was curtailed. Bands were placed around their necks to represent the controlling of the flow of the life force from head into the spine. The person responsible for placing the band was the one who controlled the energy so encircled. Emancipation from slavery was thus often called 'neck-loosing'.

It is interesting that in the contemporary Western world, and in the East, too, by imitation of the West, men in office jobs are often expected to wear a 'uniform' which includes the strange idea of a tie worn around the neck. It is such a widespread convention that we hardly notice it, and yet it is a very clear symbol of the constriction of the flow of life force. The company which employs the office worker 'owns' his freedom, as in a slave, and the open-necked, casually dressed employee may not be taking seriously enough the discipline of employment, the recognition that the company expects his energies to be devoted to their cause, and not something which might be more personal to him.

In the cultures of ancient Europe the very idea of freedom was related to the sexual act, to the liberty to participate in the fertility of life. Freedom was liberty to give expression to the sexual life force. 'Taking a liberty' with someone was, in Wyrd culture, meant literally. For example, the Anglo-Saxon word 'freo' not only means free in the social and political sense, but also means 'having desire, joy'. Freedom of spirit was celebrated by making love. And it was joyful. Life force flowed down from the head through the neck, and into the loins. The neck was the crucial channel for this flow of potent energy. From this understanding comes our contemporary term of 'necking' for kissing, for an Anglo-Saxon phrase to refer to one's lover was a 'neck bed-fellow'! This places sexual energy and expression at the core of the idea of life force.

The concept of life force was spread all over Europe, finding

expression in different but closely related ways in various tribal cultures. The Romans, for example, had a similar belief, a notion that the force of fertility and birth, the gift of life, health, vitality, was the same in nature as it was in people – and that this life force was separate from the human conscious self. And for the Romans, too, the head was the source of the seed of this life force in humans.

So Frigg, Mother Earth, in her sexual openness was providing life force, the life stuff of freedom.

— Lust and Fertility —

Later in the civilisation of early Europe, Frigg was joined by a masculine representative of love and sexuality. He was imaged in the pantheon as the 'brother' of Frigg's magical aspect, Freya, and was called Frey.⁴ We do not know why this sex-change happened, late on in the first millennium, but since Tacitus tells us that just as no one fought when Nerthus was making her rounds on the circuit, so the introduction of Frey as a male counterpart in the warrior society was strongly counter to the fighting ethos of that subculture. The ban against weapons in Frey's temples, his anger when blood was shed on his sacred land, the taboo against outlaws in his holy place, all are in accordance with his character as a bringer of peace, just like Mother Earth, when weapons were put away and peace pertained in her presence.

The forces of fertility, of increase, of birth, peace and harmony rested with the female embodiment of Frigg. At some point in the second half of the first millennium, male culture tried to engage with this aspect of the cosmos. The first depictions of Frey may have been 'literary', that is, expressed through invention of the oral story-tellers and poets. But it obviously served a deep need since Frey was eventually established, at the end of this period in history, as the chief god of Sweden. But of course he was introduced partly at the expense of Frigg, so dividing the two aspects of the forces they represented.

It is just possible that what we are seeing here was an attempt to return to the values of peace and prosperity, harmony and love in a culture which by the Viking Age had become very embattled, with rival warrior leaders vying for power. A male version of Frigg repre-

sented a desire for peace, and a male peace and fertility god cut more ice within the closed world of elite warriors than that of a goddess. So Frey, or Frigg in male disguise, became the chief god of fertility in the late pagan period; he was the paramount god of the Swedes, and the divine ancestor of their kings. Snorri Sturluson describes Frey as 'beautiful and mighty. Frey is the noblest of the gods. He controls the rain and the sunshine and therefore the natural increase of the earth, and it is good to call upon him for fruitful seasons and for peace. He also controls the good fortunes of men.'

He is depicted in the sagas as journeying around the countryside to be present at feasts, as did Nerthus much earlier. And his overtly sexual nature mirrored the image of Frigg; Adam of Bremen reported in the eleventh century that Frey's wooden image at Uppsala, Sweden, was fronted by a gigantic penis, symbolising his powers of fertility and prosperous increase, and that the Swedes made sacrifices to him at weddings: 'He bestows peace and pleasure on mortals.'⁵

The consequences of shifts in the male/female embodiment of life forces in cosmological imagery is probably far greater than we realise. Although our individual gender does not necessarily conform to mythological notions of masculine and feminine, both aspects being present in everyone for potential expression, the imagery we employ for understanding life undoubtedly influences the ways in which we understand ourselves and each other. There are no detailed stories remaining of Frigg expressing her fertility functions in human terms, but there are some concerning Frey who, because he figured late in the development of the cosmology, had more of his stories recorded in forms which have survived until today.

Snorri Sturluson tells a story, which begins one day when Frey had dared to sit in Odin's High Seat, from where he could look out over all the worlds.⁶ To the north, in Jotunheim, the land of the giants, he caught sight of a large hall, and while he watched, a beautiful young woman named Gerd walked up to it. When she raised her arms to open the door, they were so bright that they illumined the sky and sea, and the whole world grew bright from her.

Frey was thunderstruck. He crept away sick with longing for the woman. When he got home, he could not sleep, eat or drink. No one

dared to address him, such was his mood. Eventually Frey's close friend and assistant, Skirnir, asked him why he was so downcast that he could not speak to anybody. Frey explained to him. He said that he had seen a beautiful woman and felt that he would soon die if he could not have her. 'Now you are to go,' he said to Skirnir, 'and woo her for me and bring her here whether her father wishes it or not. I will reward you well for it.'

Skirnir agreed to go, but asked Frey to lend him his sword to take with him, since the sword was such a good one that it fought by itself. Frey agreed to that and gave him the sword. Then Skirnir went and wooed the woman for him and obtained her promise that, nine nights later, she would come to a place called Barrey and there marry Frey. When, however, Skirnir told Frey the result of his mission, Frey complained:

One night is long,
long is a second,
how shall I three endure?
shorter to me
has a month often seemed
than this half bridal-eve.

This story has all the elements of a seasonal fertility myth. Gerd's name means 'field', suggesting that the fertility god has seen a field he lusts after. She is described as having arms so bright, and this suggests that she is a field covered with early spring frost.

Frey wishes to fertilise it, and he sends Skirnir to attract her (the field's) agreement. Skirnir means 'shining', and probably refers to the sun. He goes to woo her equipped with Frey's magic sword, and Gerd agrees to marry Frey at Barrey (meaning barley) in nine nights' time, a magic timespan which probably corresponds to a fertility ritual which lasts for nine nights. Icelandic writer Magnus Magnusson suggests that these rituals seem to have been 'played out in the Frey cult with scenes of sacred and ritualised intercourse',⁷ though the participants would have had to wait, as frustrated as Frey was, until the ninth night.

Such acts of cosmic intercourse may be echoed later, and celebrated in the stone carved figures on medieval churches.⁸ These figures vary

from six inches to two feet in height. They take the form of a woman with a grotesquely enlarged vagina, usually held open with one or both hands. In one example (the eleventh-century church at Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire) the woman is flanked by a 'supporter' having an animal's head and a naked man's body, with stiff penis and testicles ready for action; he is not identified, but certainly depictions of Frey, or his equivalent in the local god and goddess names, may have been represented by a shaman in the dramatic, celebratory reconstructions of the event.

The vivid emphasis on sexuality and fertility of Mother Earth ran strongly counter to the official views of the Church, which through St Paul felt demeaned by 'earthly love', and had turned its version of the Earth Mother into the Blessed Virgin Mary.

— Sexual Metaphors —

Overtly sexual metaphors for the dynamics of the natural world seem alien to us today. We are now much more accustomed to scientific language in which the stories of nature are recounted in a more literal fashion. Science provides descriptions (which, if they are satisfying enough to us, we call 'explanations') of phenomena in language which meets fully the requirements of consensual validation, and seeks to minimise the subtleties and complications of poetic metaphor. But the scientific realm of discourse, while it has brought us knowledge of the functioning of the natural world and many practical benefits, proceeds from an 'objective' view. The environment being observed and accounted for is an object; the very process of scientifically encountering the world is to distance it from ourselves.

In mythological terms this is the masculine, analytic view. In restoring a consciousness in which we are once again connected to the Earth, I believe we can learn from our former ways of doing things by complementing our objective understanding of the natural world with poetic metaphor, artistic vision, dramatic involvement. We do this unconsciously, of course, in that much of our everyday 'art' has highly charged images of nature. But these images are confined to domains like advertising, in which emotive aspects of the natural

world are used to connect with us in order to promote a product. We are dimly aware of the power of the images, but they are trivialised in serving solely commercial purposes.

And yet our responses and psychological connections to images of the environment are deeper and more powerful than we generally recognise. We do not normally probe the inner dynamics of our aesthetic appreciation of natural landscape. Joseph Sonnenfeld carried out a study with residents of Alaska, and showed the subjects slides which depicted landscapes varying on one or more of four basic dimensions: topography, water, vegetation, and temperature. The results revealed that males tended to prefer landscapes with rougher topography and with indications of water, while females preferred vegetated landscapes in warmer environments.⁹

We expect such preferences to be culturally influenced, of course, and it might easily be thought that the more rugged landscapes preferred by men are simply a predictable outcome of the male sex-role expectations and subculture in North America. But the results cannot be explained away as simply as that, for they also show that men, rather than women, show greater preference for water. As the American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan points out, in religious and psychoanalytic literature, water – especially still water – tends to be treated as a symbol for the feminine principle.¹⁰

It is possible that people are attracted to landscapes which express deep aspects of the opposite sex. But whatever it is, it is clear from these gender differences in landscape preference that there may well be deep and important psychological factors linking us with our perception of the Earth, even in our modern, insulated-from-nature world, which are akin to the poetically inspired and expressed images of the world of Wyrð. We need to balance the mythologically masculine principles of science with the mythologically feminine realms of the arts.

— Mother Earth Gives Birth —

Frigg was ruler over human productivity. Just as we have seen her role as Mother Earth in crop ceremonies, so also human reproduction was

seen in the same light. People are 'nature' too, and they bore fruit. Birth in particular was the province of Frigg, and in the *Edda* poem *Oddrunargrattr* Frigg is named, together with her magical aspect Freya, as a goddess to be invoked by women in labour. In Frigg and Freya's earlier Germanic form Frija they gave the name to Friday. It is intriguing to note that until recent times Friday was long considered in Germany to be a lucky day for marriages.¹¹

So Mother Earth as Frigg represented love and, through its physical expression in people as sexual intercourse, then birth. It has always puzzled me that early anthropologists were so concerned with whether indigenous peoples recognised the connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy/childbirth; whether they knew 'the facts of life'. For those indigenous peoples who bred and farmed animals could not fail to realise such a connection; even hunters who knew the life cycle of their prey animals would realise this aspect of the population of the species they were observing. But this mundane aspect of life and birth was subject to the sacred dimension. Sexual intercourse does not inevitably lead to pregnancy, and so, our ancestors assumed, there were other factors involved. Today we might regard these other factors as psychological (stress, desire) and biological (time of the monthly cycle of the female); for our ancestors these were more to do with aspects of the sacred (psychological state dependent on life harmony, and women's cycle connected to the moon). Certainly they may have been puzzled as to why we would consider this physical aspect of birth to be so important, when the spirit dimension was what really interested them.

Most so-called primitive societies have a much fuller awareness of women's cycles than we do today. The monthly bleeding of a woman was a significant event in early cultures, sometimes resulting in taboos which we would consider misguided today (for example, not eating with a woman who was menstruating).¹² But while we would not wish to duplicate some of the ways in which the awareness was expressed, it seems likely to me that most indigenous peoples understood the connection between intercourse and, nine months later or so, the birth of a baby. Certainly Frigg's role as Mother Earth presiding over love and childbirth suggests that our ancestors wished to

make much more significance out of it than we do.

In recent years researchers have revealed a number of inscriptions which have survived from Roman times in Germany, Holland and Britain, and which are referred to as 'The Mothers'.¹³ The ancient Roman culture had a parallel group to the Three Sisters called the Parcae, meaning 'to bring forth', and they were concerned with human birth and life. We know the importance of these women survived into this millennium: in the eleventh century Bishop Burchard of Worms rebuked women in general for their continued belief in three women known as the Parcae; he complained that it was a common custom (probably near the time of childbirth) to lay three places at table for them.¹⁴

But the potency of these rituals is not surprising; in those times, famine when crops failed or became diseased, or when human life was threatened and lost through plagues, were experiences close to home for many individuals. And a consequent deep sense of awe and gratitude at the coming of life must have counterbalanced the ease with which it could be snatched away.

Every tribal settlement then paid especial attention to fertility and motherhood, and underlined the importance of this aspect of womanhood.

— Dance of the Mothers —

Among our ancestors, motherhood, a state exclusive to women, was celebrated by women, and expressed, even flaunted, as a woman's way of knowing, a woman's mystery. Traces of their potent rituals survived until very recently in Europe. In the tribal groups of ancient Europe a birth triggered a communal response from the women of the settlement.¹⁵ They ran wild. All the women, of all ages, danced and shouted their way to the house of the mother and, once assembled there, conducted some secret women's ceremonies. When these were complete, the women burst out of the house in a frantic race through the village; they all ran together, shouting and shrieking. In an account from the north of Schleswig, if they met any men they 'snatched off their hats and filled them with dung'. If they came across

farm carts, implements of men's work, they broke them into pieces and set the horse at liberty. They went into houses and took all the food and drink they wanted, and if there were any men present, they compelled them to dance. This description is one of liberation, triumph, joy, freedom, and aggression.

We have no details from Schleswig of the secret ceremonies conducted by the women in the house of the mother who had just given birth, but an account from thirteenth-century Denmark provides a glimpse of what probably went on in similar forms all over Europe: 'the women gathered together in the house and sang and shouted while they made a manikin of straw which they called the Ox.' Two women danced with the Ox erotically, and sang secret songs. And then another woman began to sing in a deep, coarse voice, using 'terrible words' (the account is from the Christian reporter of the event, of course!).

These rituals surrounding childbirth (which, in those days, would have been medically supervised by a female midwife) are dramatic. Celebrations and secret, carousing rituals exclusive to women, followed by exuberant, exhibitionistic and even aggressive communal public behaviour which appear to claim a superior status to men who were abused, 'compelled to dance', and had their 'hats filled with dung'.

It is a radical contrast with the twentieth-century male-dominated world of obstetrics.¹⁶ For the childbearing woman, as well as the village women, this experience must have been liberating and empowering. The men presumably went along with it, cooperated, respected the outpouring of feminine energy. They must also have felt threatened. The entire tone of the celebrations placed them firmly in deficit. These are connections with Mother Earth which men do not have.

Childbearing and menstruating are a kind of ongoing initiation, confirmation of belongingness to a world of mysterious knowledge for which men have no naturally occurring biological entry. The girl or the woman becomes conscious of a sanctity that emerges from the innermost depths of her being. For the woman the initiation is equivalent to a change of level, to the passing out of one mode of being into another. It is not the natural phenomenon of giving birth that consti-

tutes the mystery; it is the revelation of the feminine sacredness; that is, of the mystic unity between life, woman, nature and the divinity.

Frigg, representing the Wyrd view of birth, clearly identified the union of sustenance (rebirthing) of the Tree of Life, the cosmological level of things, with the birthing and life-nurturing of individual human life. It represents, and reminds us, that motherhood is an expression, from within our own species, of a cosmological principle in which the birth of everything is a never-ending process. Medical advances in childbirth are a boon, but the formerly powerful role of Mother Earth, Frigg, reminds us to be aware of the cosmological, spiritual sense of awe and respect, excitement and gratitude at the miracle of birth.

Somehow the welcome advances of scientific medicine at one and the same time allow us to enhance the safety of mother and child at birth, but anaesthetise us to the miracle of the creation of life. In birthing all of creation, Mother Earth identifies childbirth with the deepest expression of all fertile creation, and recognises the spiritual significance of motherhood. Not merely the demanding, exhausting, important but nevertheless prosaic childcaring role, but a significance which can hardly be measured, such is its ubiquity. This is a powerful concept of motherhood. Mother Earth, motherhood, was sacralised in Wyrd culture as being both the basis and the pinnacle of life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Deep Waters: *Consulting the Wells of Wisdom*

— The Sacred Power of Water —

Waterways were familiar territory for many people in ancient Europe, for whom boats and ships comprised one of the most effective forms of transport. Instead of travelling along highways, they went down rivers, across lakes, around the coastal waters for fishing and even across stretches of open ocean. They had plenty of experience of being out on the water, and this is reflected in their literature. One of the surviving fragments of text from our tribal heritage deals with the sea. It is in fact one of a collection of Anglo-Saxon riddles, in which the task was to guess what, or whom, is doing the talking in the riddle. The lines, written in their original form over a thousand years ago, translate as follows:

Sometimes I plunge through the press of waves, surprising men,
delving to the earth, the ocean bed. The waters ferment, sea-horses
foaming . . . The whale-mere roars, fiercely rages, waves beat upon
the shore; stones and sand, seaweed and saltspray, are flung against
the dunes when, wrestling far beneath the waves, I disturb the earth,
the vast depths of the sea . . . Sometimes I swoop to whip up waves,
rouse the water, drive the flint-grey rollers to the shore. Spuming
crests crash against the cliff, dark precipice looming over deep
water; a second tide, a sombre flood, follows the first; together they
fret against the sheer face, the rocky coast. Then the ship is filled
with the yells of sailors . . . Tell me my name . . .¹

The name is Aegir, god of the sea. These lines, oral poetry written down in England in the late 900s AD and rendered into modern English by Kevin Crossley-Holland, portray the sea storming, a personality with attributes, actions, powers, and leave it to us to name it.